

Resources: Marxism, the background to film

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Resources: Marxism and Film

--Chuck Kleinhans

Any short survey of Marxist materials which are useful and/or essential for ~~the~~ filmmakers and film students must be selective, personal, and politically biased. Therefore the following annotated bibliography makes no pretensions to being exhaustive, balanced, or truly representative. It is rather what I would recommend to someone who knew something about film who wanted to find out what Marxism is about and how it can be applied to film.

Marxism is neither monolithic nor homogenous; therefore the beginner has a good deal of picking and choosing to do, and should be aware that whatever the specific discussion at hand is about, every Marxist is working with a set of ^{general} given assumptions and also some very specific ~~ones~~ positions which are constantly debated within Marxism. The general assumptions can be briefly stated following Lenin's essay, "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism." The sources are German philosophy, English political economy and French socialism. In turn the parts are historical or dialectical materialism, the analysis of capitalism resting on the doctrine of surplus value, and the concept of class struggle. Specific positions within Marxism are many. Some of the recurrent and crucial

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ones are the relation of Marx to ~~Hegel~~ the German philosopher Hegel, the relation of the economic base to the social and political superstructure, the question of ideology and false consciousness, the nature and function of the communist party, the analysis of classes (particularly the working class, which is seen as the primary agent of change from capitalism to socialism), the nature of distinct groups within a country (the national question), the precise nature of contemporary ^{and} capitalisms, correct positions on electoral and parliamentary efforts, the trade unions, forming alliances, violence, and so forth. In the field of culture two of the most important and debated questions are the relation of art and ideology and ~~the~~ realism in art.

In what follows a number of my own positions will be clear to Marxists, but I'll indicate as well some of my own political development as a reference point for what follows.

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~~1. BASIC MARXISM~~

The following is selected in large part in terms of what
in English
is most readily and inexpensively available to Americans.
Where some items are especially significant and useful they
are included, though you'd likely have to find them in a
fairly large university library, and a few of them are only
available in foreign languages. This is an introductory
guide: using it you'll quickly discover dozens more important
and interesting books and articles.

1. BASIC MARXISM

Marxism is totalizing philosophy according to Jean-Paul
Sartre. This means that "marxist film criticism" cannot
be genuinely separated from the rest of Marxism: the ~~departmental~~/L/
division in higher education into departments, disciplines,
schools, and programs is antithetical to Marxist thought.
For this reason, simply reading Marxist film criticism is totally
inadequate. Even Marxist aesthetics does not stand alone. So,
a basic grounding in Marxism is essential ~~to~~ before moving
into cultural criticism.

The best first thing to read is The Communist Manifesto
(many editions, included in Mills, below) which polemically
Next,
lays out all the important issues and concepts. A superb
concise introduction: Lenin's Karl Marx: A Brief Biographical
Sketch with an Exposition of Marxism, available in pamphlet

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Peking:
(Foreign Languages Press, 1970; rptd from Lenin, Marx, Engels, Marxism (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1951)
from China Books (address below), Maoist bookstores and some
nonsectarian left bookstores.

(It's worth noting ~~here~~ that very few commercial bookstores
carry or know how to order an adequate selection of marxist
books, thus mail order is usually essential. In larger cities
you're mostlikely to find a nonsectarian left or movement
bookstore which will ^{have or} know how to find what you want; also
you may find a Communist Party bookstore--seldom identified
as such; "New World" is a popular name of them--which will
carry extensive Soviet titles and usually most of International's
titles. Trotskyist bookstores are often called "Pathfinder
Books" and carry the Socialist Workers Party's Pathfinder
Press titles. China Books and Maoist (also called Marxist-
leninist or M-L) stores are obviously strong on China and the
(and cheapest)
Third World, but are also best on the Marxist classics (about
the only place to find Stalin these days). Don't expect to
find Mao and Trotsky in the CP stores; Stalin, Mao, or the New
Left among the Trots; etc. But every left bookstore has it's
quirks: my favorite is Chicago's China Books which pulled Confusius
off the shelves during the current Chinese campaign against him
but left Lao Tzu and the I Ching; they also carry marvellous
inexpensive postcards. Your best bet is to check the Yellow
Pages for "progressive" sounding names, though they can be subtle
as Milwaukee's defunct Rhubard (red at the root) Bookstore
demonstrates.)

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A number of good anthologies of Marxist classics can be found in any left bookstore, or bookstore with a section on Marxism (sometimes within the philosophy or political science section). Essential Works of Marxism, ed. Arthur P. Mendel (NY: Bantam pb, 1961) is a good buy. But the beginner will probably want a guidebook as well, and two works by non-Marxists are helpful here. ^{The first half of} Irving M. Zeitlin's Marxism: A Re-examination (NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold pb, 1967) is an especially clear exposition of the philosophical foundations and Marx's analysis of capitalist production. However in the second half Zeitlin guts the revolutionary component of Marxism by trying to bring Marx within the mainstream of sociology and American political science. The Marxists by C. Wright Mills (NY: Dell pb, 1962) was written just before Mills' early death which cut short his transition into Marxism. It remains a lucid sociologically-oriented interpretation that alternates ~~xxx~~ Selections from Marxism with Mills' acute commentary. If you're convinced by Mills of the limits of Marxism, read Fredy Perlman's C. Wright Mills and the Incoherence of the Intellectual (Detroit: Red and Black,) for a basic refutation.

2. INTERMEDIATE MARXISM

Further readings in Marxism complement the next ~~xxx~~ sections, "Basic Texts and Commentaries in Marxist Aesthetics." For obvious reasons the political discussion of Marxism has been the most extensive. Lenin, of course, is the central figure,

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first
but for clarity you're better off reading ~~Mao/Tse/Tung/~~
Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tsetung (Peking:
Foreign Languages Press, 1971). The one-volume Lenin:
Selected Works (NY: International, 1971) is excellent, however
because so much of Lenin's writing is specific to Russia and

supplemented iwth his What is To Be ^{Done}? (NY: International pb,
1961)

intramural and extramural debates in building the Bolshevik
Party, be prepared for slow going and constant footnotes.
(There is, unfortunately, no readily available short English
language history of the Bolshevik party or or marxist biography
of Lenin; Issac Deutcher's one-volume Stalin (NY: Vintage,)
and three*volume ~~biography-of~~ Trotsky (
~~are-helpful~~ provide vital historical background.)

The other major figures in political marxism: Rosa Luxemburg,
Selected Political Writings, ed. Dick ^{Howard} (NY: Monthly Review
pb, 1971) whose disagreements with Lenin were founded on her
politic al work in Germany and which seem much closer to the
American situation than Czarist Russia; Antonio Gramsci,
Prison Notebooks (NY: International, pb,) increasingly
recognized as a major theoretician and analyst; and of course
the two incompatables, Leon Trotsky, The Permanent Revolution
(NY: Pathfinder pb,) and Joseph Stalin, The Essential
Stalin, ed. Bruce ^{Franklin} (NY:).

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Some background in the philosophical foundations of Marxism is required to evaluate ~~many of~~ much of the Marxism discussion of culture and art. One book stands out as a brilliant explanation here: Bertell Ollman, Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society (Cambridge, Cambridge U. Press pb, 1971). Ollman supercedes an earlier study which is useful in its simplicity but which veers to a simplistic and mechanistic interpretation: Maurice Cornforth, Dialectical Materialism: an Introduction (NY: International, 4th ed 1968; in 3 small pb volumes). I should note here that Cornforth falls solidly within Marxist mainstream orthodoxy in following Engels exposition of dialectics, while Ollman represents an understanding of the later Marx based on various of his writings which only became widely known after world War II. An excellent survey of post-Lenin philosophic Marxism is The Unknown Dimension: European Marxism since Lenin, ed. Nick Howard and Karl E. Klare (NY: Basic, 1972) which surveys Georg Lukacs, Ernest Bloch, Karl Korsch, Gramsci, the Council Communists, Wilhelm Reich, The Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas, Satre, Henri Lefebvre, Galvano Della Volpe, Louis Althusser, and Serge Mallet and Andre Gorz. Since many of these writers were concerned with culture ~~rather than~~ in addition to economics, politics, and philosophy, this volume is extremely useful background for the readings in the next section. on Marxist aesthetics.

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However much background one reads, there is no substitute for reading Marx and Engels, and it's simply silly to postpone reading them. The widest assortment of inexpensive paperbacks is ~~xxx~~ put out by International, but a new edition by Vintage, "The Marx Library" is gradually coming out with complete texts in superior translations. A good start is with some of the works on past and recent history: The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (M), Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany (E), The civil War in France (M). Among the non-economic works: Condition of the Working Class in England (E), The German Ideology (M&E; the International pb only excerpts parts of sections II and III which are very specialized), A Critique of the Gotha Programme (M), Socialism: Utopian and Scientific (E) and The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (E). ~~For--There-are-also-several-xxx-xxx-xxx-books-of-selections-which--+~~

Lenin once said that in order to understand Capital one had to first understand Hegel's Logic. True, but... Capital is not completely unfathomable, in fact it must be studied, but that shouldn't keep you from reading it, or at least starting with chapter 1 of volume one and trying. (To be honest, I haven't finished; but I also haven't found it ~~xxx~~ as difficult as it's reputed to be.) Some primers and commentaries to help out:

If all that seems terribly forbidding as a way of understanding marxist economics, try working backwards from

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the classic text on contemporary American capitalism, Monopoly Capital by// An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order by Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy (NY: Monthly Review pb, 1966).

3. BASIC TEXTS AND COMMENTARIES IN MARXIST AESTHETICS

Why I'm recommending the preceding material before getting down to art may not be clear. But it will be clearer if it's understood that the development of ^{the} marxist ~~aesthetics~~ ^{whole} concept of art is intimately related to the body of Marxist thought (indeed ~~the~~ the former is part of the latter) and to specific political positions. For example, the simple and frequent assertion that art should interest and serve the working class carries with it an implicit assumption about what the proletariat is. Factory workers? All employees? All people who live on ~~un~~earned income? People without property? Manual workers? Blue collar workers? Those who must sell their labor to live? What of the peasantry in nations with peasants? What is the position of dependent women and children? Wage earners as opposed to salaried employees? Everyone who does not own the means of production? "Working class": the concept is clear on one level and complex on another. After all, how do we define work, property, means of production? The point here is that without fairly precise Marxist definitions in mind, we tend to fall back on non-Marxist ideas. So it's not merely a matter of terminology / but one of concepts. And while it might seem that we're involved here with a case of

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infinite regression in which each term has another concept behind it, which has another refinement...and on and on, that isn't quite the case. Rather, Marxism is a totality, and the beginner must grasp the whole to some extent to be able to work with a part. The refinements can be endless, but that is a matter of personal idiocy, ~~not~~ some people are eternal students. The main concepts can be grasped, and grasped well and worked with after a short time.

(So as not to keep you in suspense about the proletariat: it is defined not by the mode of production (type of work) but their relation to the means of production (production being the production of surplus value, not simply "making" or "transforming". "...The modern working class, the class of those who can only live so long as their work increases capital" Communist Manifesto. "The fundamental feature that distinguishes classes is the place they occupy in social production, and consequently, the relation in which they stand to the means of production"--Lenin, Vulgar Socialism and Narodism. It is the relation to the means of production ^{p rimarily} that determines ~~diff~~ class differences in income, attitudes and so forth, not the other way around.)

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At last we get to the art part. There is one very good selection and translation which is a must: Marx & Engels on Literature And Art: A Selection of writings, ed. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski (St Louis: Telos, 1973). Selections are arranged by topics (eg: Class Values in Literature), plus there is an interesting supplement from people who knew Marx and Engels and a superb bibliography of Books in English on Marxist aesthetics. Morawski's introduction is very good, though it should be noted he is a partisan of realism.

For the person coming to Marxist aesthetics from film some initial things should be noted. Most obviously, Marx and Engels never saw movies. This in no way negates their general and specific observations about art; for example their discussion of realism is extremely enlightening when applied to film. However, ~~if~~ Most of the time Marx and Engels refer to literature: remarks on the visual ~~and~~ arts and music are minimal. (Similarly, almost all the important discussion within Marxism has been literature-oriented) In addition, Marx and Engels have a ~~p~~ very particular cultural background: that of the educated urban middle class in 19th century Germany. They know Greek art and literature, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Goethe and Schiller; they also hold these as "masterpieces" and "classics" rather uncritically. In turn, Marxists have been divided on the question.

But most importantly, Marx and Engels writings on the arts are essentially illustrations and ~~asides~~ arguments to other

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arguments. Neither left even an essay analyzing one work in depth (though the discussion of Eugene Sue's^a novel in The Holy Family comes close), much less a worked out aesthetic. Both men seem content to keep artistic judgements separate from political ones: to be indulgent toward art-- to the dismay of doctrinaire and utilitarian marxists. But despite what could be called their failure to apply ^{rigorously} marxism to art, there is a substantial general outline in their writings of what a marxist aesthetic would be. But the reader must be forewarned ~~to~~ that Neither Marx or Engels established axioms about art. Some of Engels most often quoted remarks, for example, have to be taken as what they were: letters from The Grand Old Man to aspiring socialists writers who had sent him a novel they wrote.

Given what Marx and Engels left, it comes as no surprise that Marxist aesthetics is extremely diverse. Two anthologies represent this: the first being Marxism and Art:Essays Classic and Contemporary, ed. Maynard Solomon (NY: Vintage pb, 1973). Solomon is a ^{expansive} generous editor who ~~leaves/to~~ is generous to Anglo-American marxism. Which is good. The book covers a wide range, providing very fine background, commentary, and bibliography; in sum, essential. Fortunately, Marxism and Art, ed. Berel Lang and Forrest Williams (NY: McKay pb, 1972) complements the Solomon book by including ^{other} important selections, particularly from Europeans.

Two recent translations serve well as general commentaries. ~~en~~ Henri Avron's Marxist Esthetics (Ithica: Cornell pb, 1973) is a lucid short introduction with a good analysis of the

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Brecht-Lukacs debate. In a more rambling format, Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez ~~discusses~~ presents and discusses all the major issues, leaning to a post-Stalin orthodoxy in his Art And Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics (NY: Monthly Review pb, 1973). In French: Henri Lefebvre, Contribution a l'esthetique (Paris: 1953).

4. The MAIN TRENDS IN MARXIST AESTHETICS

From this point on a good deal of criss-crossing must take place to do justice to important differences in within Marxist cultural criticism. Issues and positions, particularly since the Bolshevik revolution, have been heavily influenced by political differences (which is why considering Marxist aesthetics apart from the political, ~~the problem~~ ^{a good reason} and theoretical debates in Marxism is faulty.). For example, Trotsky was "liberal" to experimentalism, bourgeois art, and distinguished the specific political convictions of the artist from evaluating the art work. (as did Marx, distinguishing Balzac's novels from the writer's royalist politics; similarly Lenin's four essays on Tolstoy explain how the novels are progressive, while the man himself was a mystical christian anarchist kook.) George Luckacs (also Georg, Georgy and Gyorgy...and there's incremental ^{respective} a progressive snobbism ~~is/are~~ in each usage; something marxists, alas, are not always exempt from), in sharp contrast to Trotsky, ~~was~~ ^{Marxist} is known as the major opponent of modernism, yet he is indulgent to bourgeois art (if realist), and like Trotsky

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distinguishes art'from an artist's politics. In fact his essay on Balzac's novel The Peasants is a classic ~~statement~~ text on the question. However it would be astounding to find a Trotskyist critic quoting Lukacs' on the matter, for Lukacs is also the major western defender of Socialist Realism and politically a defender of Stalin until destalinization (1956), something no self respecting Trotskyist could tolerate. Nor could a Trotskyist find ~~much~~ comfort in Lukac's major opponent in the modernism/realism debate, Brecht, since Brecht remained a Communist Party member from the 1920's to his death in 195 . To the uninitiated this may well seem bizarre to say the least, but it is not when the ^{inherent and constant} political dimension of Marxist thinking about the arts is considered. To use lukacs as an example again, ~~are~~ how are we to regard his early kantian idealism (~~Style and Form, 1911~~), his later "Hegelian" marxism (History and Class Consciousness, 1923 (Cambridge: MIT, 1971) which he refuted when it was attacked in the Fifth Comintern Congress (the highest international party body), his political and aesthetic work solidly within the Stalinist orthodoxy in the 30's and ~~for the~~ 40's, and his final phase following the 20th Party congress (the 1956 destalinization)? ~~Aside from~~ ~~nothing else~~ Which is to say that one's position on the Hegel question, on Stalin, and on post-1956 Soviet "revisionism" all ~~influence~~ are bound to influence one's reading of Lukacs, besides and beyond narrowly aesthetic matters. Or to put it another way, studying Marxist cultural criticism is political and demands both specific and general political positions be taken by the reader.

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Because Socialist Realism is held in such disrepute, associated with censorship to the point of physical annihilation of the dissent, it is very worthwhile to examine the theoretical papers to attempt a fair judgement of the doctrine.

provides the documents.

Unquestionably the major figure within the mainstream is Lukacs. Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle (NY: Harper & Row, 1964) lays^{out} his attack on modernism (Kafka, James Joyce, etc.) ~~out-with~~ and his championing of Thomas Mann as the greatest 20th century writer. Definately at his best on writers he admires, Studies in European Realism NY (Grosset & Dunlap pb, 1964) contains his Balzac essays. The acute observations on the imaginative treatment of history in The Historical Novel (NY Boston: Beacon pb, 1963) remain to be applied to films. His major work Aesthetik (Neuwied, 1965) remains untranslated; until then Writer and Critic collects (NY: Grosset pb, 1971) ~~his major essays~~ important essays. Lukacs' promoters and followers, gingerly stepping among his changing political positions, are a generally depressing lot; a refreshing, non-Marxist, short background and critique is George Lichtheim's Lukacs (London: Fontana, 1970) which manages to be informed, clear, ~~through~~ balanced and unfair. (no sic).

Other traditionalists ~~who~~ deserve attention. George Plekhanov's Art and Social Life (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1953) is a ~~classic~~ minor classic which ~~who~~ is well critiqued by Lee Baxandall in "Marxism and Aesthetics: A Critique of the Contribution of George Plekhanov," Journal of Aesthetics

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With that warning should be coupled another, that a premature partisanship or sectarianism on cultural questions is a perversion of Marxism. The best source for understanding this is Lenin, whose combination of hard thought and indulgence on matters of art is seen in Lenin on Literature and Art (Moscow: Progress, 1970). (As an aside, the Soviet editors don't both to point out that Lenin's considerable liberalism to the writer Maxim Gorky may have had something to do with the fact that Gorky's sister-in-law was a substantial contributor to the Bolshevik Revolutionary party during the exile. Politics, be it remembered, mixes pragmatics and purism.) ~~Stalin's pre-revolutionary work included robbing banks to finance the revolution. (1918-19)-----~~

Two general trends can be distinguished first: an orthodox or traditional or mainstream Marxist aesthetics which begins with Marx and Engels writings on art, and an unorthodox or radical trend which tends to find sources in other aspects of Marx's writing. But, take note, even this division is crosshatched with overlays of partisan positions.

Within orthodoxy the clearest argument of a utilitarian position (judging art in close relation to the Party's activities) is Mao Tse-tung, On Literature and Art (Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1967). Opponents of ~~this~~ this tendency tend to label it Zhdanovism after its vigorous Soviet promoter; and it's most frequently associated with Soviet Socialist Realism of the mid-30s to 1956 within the soviet orbit, though it is still orthodoxy within the USSR.

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and Art Criticism, 25 (1966-67), 267-278. In Studies and Further Studies in a Dying Culture (NY: Monthly Review, 1971) ~~on-bourgeois-ideas~~ Christopher Caudwell's acute essays are collected, such as "Beauty: A study in Bourgeois Aesthetics." ~~/~~ Caudwell ^{swiftly} cuts to the heart of bourgeois ideology. Literature and Revolution () and On Literature and Art, ed Paul N. Seigel (NY Pathfinder, 1970) contain Leon Trotsky's positions. ~~important-writing-on~~

At the edge of the mainstream, Ernst Fischer's The Necessity of Art (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), ~~Hans-M~~ Sartre's earlier essays (the Situations series in French, collected variously and confusedly in English. try What is Writing? (NY))

In assessing the unorthodox ~~/~~ trend in Marxist criticism its diversity presents a problem. Therefore some important figures will be considered below in sections on mass culture/^{theories} and mass media, ~~the~~ marxist critique of culture, influential ^{all worthwhile} theorists. It's worth noting as well that aesthetic ^{considering} theories are derived from ~~the~~ concrete works of art ~~unless~~ (except for sterile and stillborn theorizing). A superb reminder is John Berger's Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of Artist in the USSR (NY: Pantheon pb, 1969), a genuinely essential book. Sooner or later, but sooner is better, ~~as~~ a marxist can't ~~simply~~ be satisfied with only ~~receptively~~ considering the reactionary and/or progressive aspects of bourgeois art but will want to

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consider the artistic productions of writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, ~~dancers~~ performing artists and crafts workers (the crafts, particularly those with folk roots, are generally held in high esteem in socialist countries) who live in the socialist countries ~~and~~/ or are affiliated with the left movements in the nonsocialist nations. Filmmakers are discussed in the film section; here is a selected and personal list of other cultural workers:

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5. UNORTHODOX TRENDS IN MARXIST AESTHETICS

In assessing the ~~unorthodox~~ Marxist counter tradition in art criticism, the very diversity presents a problem. Therefore some important figures will be considered below in sections on mass culture/mass media, the marxist critique of culture, and influential theorists.